

Benediction: Be Who You Already Are

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Last Sermon as Pastor
Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Mark 10:1, 1 John 2:1–2

Well.

Here we are.

Wendell Berry, well into his 80s and a rare mix of farmer, poet, and environmental activist, was speaking at a conference when he pushed his notes away and said:

That's enough. I've made a lot of speeches in my time, and I've really grown tired of hearing them.

I can understand that. I saw something like that happen with Frederick Buechner. It was an event at the National Cathedral to honor his lifetime of writing sermons and preaching. The cathedral was packed, Barbara Brown Taylor had just preached a sermon, and Buechner was supposed to do a dialogue about preaching with another prominent preacher. There were television cameras situated to capture the event. Buechner was asked a long, winding question, and he shut the whole thing down when instead of a long, winding answer, he said:

Can we just be quiet? Can we have some silence?

It's probably time to retire when you hear yourself quoting yourself. In 12–15 minutes, I'll be pushing my notes away and getting quiet. However, in order to come full circle, I want to refer one last time to what I said 18 years ago during my first sermon as your pastor. I said that I wanted to touch your souls; to put a welcome mat in front of mine; and for us to walk around together inside the soul of Jesus.

Preaching is an act of audacity. I had never felt more audacious than when I said that. 18 years later, I still remember how I felt when those words came to me, and when I spoke them here out loud. I thought then, and I'm even more certain now, that these words were given to me, for this is what our life together has been like for me.

So many times, I found a welcome mat in front of your door. The way you have received what I've had to offer is astonishing to me. It has been grace on top of grace. Thank you!

I did not anticipate what it would do to me when you put your feet on the welcome mat of my soul, and came through the door. For me, that has been nothing less than transforming. That had not happened before in the way it has happened here.

It has been such a gift—and this is one of many reasons I'm so excited for Leah—to preach and pastor to a congregation of beloved friends that I hold in such love and regard. And so does she.

That changes everything. I was always aware that I was not the smartest person in the room, nor was I the most kind and compassionate, the most Christian, or the most wise. I chose not to be intimidated by that, but to stand here with a quiet sense of wonder—a sense of wonder at the Gospel of Jesus, a treasure that never gets fully discovered and that never gets boring, and a sense of wonder at the congregation whose faces I was looking into. It has not felt as much like I was preaching to you, as I was preaching in the middle of our life together, trying to put into words what the Gospel was doing to us.

What the Gospel was doing was the work of transformation, so incremental that though it was in plain sight, it was not always obvious. I could describe with personal authority how changed I am by our life together these 18 years, but I can also bear witness to what I have seen and heard in our Beloved Community.

Thinking back to that Sunday 18 years ago, it sounded and felt most audacious when I expressed the hope that we would walk around together inside the soul of Jesus. It does not feel as audacious to me now because I think Jesus invites us to do exactly that.

How can we dig into the Gospels and not encounter the inner life of Jesus?

That strange intimation that came to me 18 years ago of what our life together could be like, held no awareness on my part, no dream or expectation that during our years of Gospel work, I would have the unimaginable privilege of three trips to Galilee and Palestine. The third one was for two months, including one month on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, where so many of the gospel stories take place.

Since the first trip in 2005, and especially since the sabbatical in 2009, some of my experiences there have been woven into some of my sermons. The truth is—I have barely begun to describe the impact on me. I may continue to work on that in retirement.

Instead of my words, I'll quote someone else, Bargil Pixner, the late Benedictine monk and archaeologist who lived in Tabgha, called Magadan in the Gospels, for 20 years before retiring in Jerusalem. He writes:

During these years in this land, I have come to know Jesus especially as a man who had to struggle against as many odds, if not far more than I do. I appreciate him now as my brother who traveled, as I do, the rugged path of human life. The personality of this God-Man always and evermore fascinates me. When I walk along the banks of the Sea I see him walking toward me from out of the morning mist or from the play of colors in the setting sun. I have learned to deeply love this man from Galilee, the man whose footsteps crisscross mine day by day here in his preferred retreat of Ma-gadan.

On our first trip in 2005, there were six of us. We spent a short afternoon in Galilee, and by that time I was pretty turned off by the commercialization of so many holy sites. When we arrived in Capernaum and were told by our guide that we had 20 minutes, I felt immediately as we walked through the gate and into the village that this was different. This is where Jesus lived as he carried out his ministry in the villages around the water.

When we went inside the synagogue, our 20 minutes were almost up. I wandered to a back room and saw where a large rectangular hole had been dug down to the level of the first century. I was mesmerized as I looked down and saw stones that were there in the time of Jesus. I lingered for a few moments, then ran out to the van where everyone else had gone. I got G.J, Gary, and Bart, looked past the annoyance of our guide, and said:

You've got to see this!

It was a typical Ravensworth moment. They immediately got why I was so excited, and it felt to me like some shimmering moments that were deeply shared by the four of us. Though I didn't know how it could happen, I knew in that moment that I had to go back. I think I may have said that out loud, with no idea of how it might happen.

It was not that I wanted to go back and find more stones, and re-trace where Jesus walked, but in this place where he lived and worked, this place he loved, I wanted to seek the Spirit, Soul, and Presence of Jesus.

Five years later, I was on sabbatical there. I met some amazing pilgrims, but I was used to being around amazing people. A nun from France, Sister Emmanuelle of the Order of Beatitudes, was there with her mother. They were going to Jerusalem for a day, and invited me to go with them. I didn't go, because I was not ready to leave my daily routine of walking to Capernaum. They had gone with me one morning for part of the walk, which included a grove of olive trees.

After their first time visit to Jerusalem, Sr. Emmanuelle told me that she had wondered at the Garden of Gethsemane, if Jesus chose to pray there because he felt homesick for the olive trees in Galilee. Jesus feeling homesick made sense to me. I'd been reading the Gospels every day, and had spent a considerable time with Mark. I had been struck by something in my reading of Mark that I don't think would ever have occurred to me.

It's so easy to overlook. And it's today's very short Gospel lesson. Mark writes, after telling about Jesus in the house at Capernaum, possibly a late night conversation with his disciples:

He left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan.

That place is Capernaum. **That place** is the seashore, Capernaum and Magadan, and Gennesaret, and Magdala, this land around the Sea of Galilee where Jesus had poured himself out to the people. And I think Sr. Emmanuelle was right. How could he not have felt a twinge of grief, knowing this would be his last night in Capernaum, his last time to watch the sun come up over the Sea of Galilee, or the occasional golden moon hanging over the water, as it did one night when I was walking from Capernaum to Tabgha?

It made more sense to me why on the morning of Easter, angels at the tomb sent word to the followers of Jesus that he wanted them to go back to Galilee.

That's where so many of the memories were. It was here in Galilee, there along the shore, walking again where Jesus had prayed and taught and healed and preached, that they would remember who they were.

What lay ahead of them was the same as what lies ahead of us—the importance of remembering—

Remembering Jesus—remembering what it was like to be in his company, remembering who he told them they truly were—salt of the earth, light of the world, friends and disciples.

The story of Jesus goes on, far beyond the rocks, trees, and water of Galilee, to Jesus as Risen Christ. The New Testament holds these stories of Jesus, and the story of his followers as they became who they already were. They remembered him, and they struggled with what it all meant to them, to the church, to the world.

And the writer of I John looks ahead to what all this means.

See what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

A moment later John returns to this and says:

Beloved, we are God's children now!

These words are full of exclamation marks. After all these years, it still sounds too good to be true. You can see the exuberance on John's face, and hear the wonder in his voice:

We, beloved, are God's daughters and sons!

He goes on to say:

*What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this:
When Christ is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is!*

In that moment when all is revealed, we will look into the face of Christ, and we will fully and truly become who we already are: beloved daughters and sons of God.

I would not have wanted to be anywhere else these 18 years, than here with you, sharing life together as friends and disciples of Jesus, daughters and sons of God, led by God's Spirit at loose in the world.

Thanks to all of you!

And thanks be to God!

Amen.